

The Call

a Testimony referencing

Jeremiah 1:4-10 and Luke 4:21-30

and delivered on

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at

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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Back in December, our Bishop Sally Dyck and the Board of Ordained Ministry issued an invitation to clergy to join in a “Day of Call” in which we would share our call to ministry and as an invitation to all of you in the church to consider and respond to God’s call. Two dates were suggested: January 13 and February 17. Today, is neither. But that passage we just heard from Jeremiah a few moments ago is one that I relate to in my experience of my call to ministry.

Jeremiah’s response was to say, “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy.. But the Lord said... “Do not say, “I am only a boy” ... you shall go to all whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you.” (Jer 1:6-7)

My worst subjects in school and college were English and Speech. Math – Science – even History – unravelling the mysteries – that was where I thrived. Even still – that wasn’t my excuse. It was a sense of being unworthy for God’s call – and frightened by what it might mean.

It was 1992 or 1993 when I really began wrestling with a call to ordained ministry. You may have heard me say it before, but my grandmother taught me that we all have a call to ministry. For her it was teaching Sunday School until she moved into assisted living and for the safety of the community she quit driving. I thought I had found that call. I was working for a Christian organization serving people with developmental and intellectual disabilities. I was on the fast track in my career. I’d already received one promotion and was on my way to another in less than two years. (Something I would point out to my Dad, who had told me that I’d never get a job with my degree as long as I had that pony tail) It felt good to think that I’d found the place God wanted me to be.

But God can be sneaky. He uses where we are to work out his piurpose in us. It’s not that I’d never had a sense of call to ordained ministry before then. I’d had inklings. But stuff started to happen. I started to question it more myself. A woman I worked with – Heather – a Pentecostal – told me that she had a word from God for me. “Okay?” I thought. We met at McDonald’s and she told me that God wanted me back. Well, what did that mean? I was working fror a Christian organization. I was actually attending church most weeks when I wasn’t working on Sunday. When I did work on Sunday, I’d attend chapel services with the residents of the home. “Okay? I suppose?” Then she told me how my sin had hurt others. She was particular but not detailed. Her description didn’t make sense to me because I’d never done anything like what I suspect she interpreted that word to mean. But then during my daily Bible reading, I came across a story, that convicted me. It’s really too personal to share, but I realized that she had intdeed had a word from the Lord for me. What neither of us had realized is that the particular harm wasn’t directed as she supposed but an indirect consequence. If she was right about that part of the word of the Lord, what about God wanting me back?

Things started to happen. I’d be at Malo’s – a heavy metal bar in Aurora – drinking my beer at the bar when people would come up and ask me questions about God. These weren’t the “Are you saved?” type of questions, but asking me for the answer. The drummer from one band was sitting with me when it happened once, and said, “Why do all the freaks come up to you?” There were more types of things like this. But...

I knew my sin (At least I thought I did. I know a lot more now – which just magnifies my awe for God’s love and mercy.) I was divorced. How could I be called into ministry? I mentioned it to the chaplain at work. This was a Missouri Synod Lutheran – a pretty conservative guy. He simply told me to remember that Paul had once held on to the coats of those who stoned St. Stephen – the first martyr of the church.

I'm not going to go into too much more detail here – because this could get long. If you want to know more. Come talk to me and I'll share what I can.

But soon after that conversation with the chaplain, I got another promotion and moved to Plainfield, Illinois where I transferred into Plainfield United Methodist Church. For various reasons, I wasn't spending holidays with family at the time. So the associate pastor, Rev. Kristen Larsen, invited me to join her and her husband for Thanksgiving at her parents' home. On the drive home, I took a chance and asked, "How do you know if you have a call?" Now the answer that I was looking for is "If you don't know, then you don't." That would have gotten me off of the hook. But that wasn't the answer. I don't even remember what the answer was. What I do know is that she kept coming up with opportunities for me to explore the call. One of those opportunities was an seminary exploration experience. Before I could question the cost, she informed me that the church had already agreed to pay. That weekend confirmed my call.

Even though I didn't know how I was going to pay for seminary. I was paying child support and student loans, I answered. More specifically I answered "Yes." And God provided.

I'd never met the woman, but Janet Brown had been a member who'd left her sizable estate to the church. The church had decided to invest that gift with the intention to spend only the interest (and only a tithe 10% to the regular budget – with everything else going to new ministries. So, while I was in my first course at seminary, the Missions – chair from Plainfield UMC called me and said the church had just created the Janet Brown scholarship for church members attending seminary and that I needed to fill out an application so that they could give me the money.

Now here's the thing. I really got the call when I was twelve year's old – sitting in that pew at Bartonville United Methodist Church – the pew that had been given in memorial for my great-grandfather. Rev. Armbruster was preaching on Jonah. He was retelling the story about Jonah running from God's call. I remember sitting there in that pew rooting for Jonah the whole time – and thinking I'd do the same thing.

None of my reluctance to answer my call was because I thought ordained ministry was bad, but because I didn't think – and still don't – that I was up to the task. Like Jeremiah – who was just a boy and couldn't speak – I had a lot of excuses. Like Jesus, whose hometown rejected his ministry, it was those who knew me best who questioned, "You?" But it really isn't up to what I can do, but what God can do through me.

It's not about what you can do; but about what God can do through you. Each of you sitting here has a call to some sort of ministry. You may feel that tug but doubt it because you're not up to the task or you don't feel worthy. But God is up to the task. Through Jesus' death and resurrection – he's made you worthy.

In a moment we'll be gathering around the communion table. I'm reminded of what Lawrence Stookey says in his book *The Eucharist* (I'm paraphrasing {from memory}). Speaking to those who avoid the Sacrament because they don't feel worthy, he says that that's the point. We're not worthy. If we were worthy, we wouldn't need it – we wouldn't need grace. But God offers his gift so that we will be worthy. I'd go further and say what makes us worthy is our willingness to accept God's gifts in whatever form they present to us.

There are lots of ministries within the church. But I am going to use this opportunity to maybe plant the seed. I believe that every congregation should be putting out at least one pastor every thirty years. It's up to all of us to discern who may have that call in this congregation and to

encourage them. Because of how I've been blessed I'll add that by encourage to help make it happen like the Plainfield church did by paying for my seminary and paying for Deacon Sherry's seminary. To that end, if you haven't included the church in your estate planning, I ask you to do so. Think about it. Janet Brown never met me. I suspect that she never met most of the people in the congregations that I've served. But because of her legacy the gospel is preached – not through my imperfection, but God's perfect love that has been extend.

Don't be like me, and willingly ignore or dismiss God's call for almost twenty years. I'll give you two reasons: First God is persistent so you can save yourself the grief of running. Second, God is persistent why miss out on the joy that comes in living what he would do through you.

AMEN